

The  
Economist

---

Americas view  
**The Americas**

---

Chile's politics

# How the mighty have fallen

Jun 14th 2011, 12:48 by G.L. | SANTIAGO



VOTERS famously have short memories. Despite their reputation as a sober, well-governed lot, Chileans are no exception. Just six months ago Sebastián Piñera (pictured), the president, was riding high after the [miraculous rescue](http://www.economist.com/node/17251964) (<http://www.economist.com/node/17251964>) of 33 miners who had been trapped underground for ten weeks. According to Adimark, a pollster, his approval rating reached 63% following the successful operation. The company's June survey painted a far grimmer picture for Mr Piñera: his support has dropped to just 36%, the lowest figure since he took office in March 2010. Meanwhile, his disapproval rating hit 56%, the highest mark for any Chilean president since the return of

democracy in 1990.

Mr Piñera's poll numbers have tumbled primarily because of his support for the Hidroaysén electricity scheme, a plan to build five dams on two rivers in the pristine wilds of Patagonia, which would flood 5,900 hectares (14,573 acres) of nature reserves. His government approved the project on May 9th, failing to anticipate staunch opposition from environmentalists. More than 30,000 people marched last month through Santiago, the capital, urging the government to halt the project.

The Hidroaysén case might not have unnerved the public quite so much had it not fit with their preconceived notions of Mr Piñera's management style. Unlike Michelle Bachelet, his popular, consensus-minded predecessor, Mr Piñera is a former business tycoon. He has centralised decision-making in his own office and rarely goes through a broad consultation process before making up his mind. As a result, when he approved the dams, many Chileans suspected that he had become too cosy with Endesa, the Spanish company leading the construction. And since his ministers are seen to have little authority, Mr Piñera himself has become a lightning rod for all criticism of his government.

The headstrong president seems unlikely to give any ground. He has already ruled out a cabinet reshuffle, and is trying to refocus the country's attention on its fast-growing economy. His inflexibility may not be merely the product of stubbornness, however. The most recent Adimark poll also contained good news for Mr Piñera: the centre-left Concertación opposition is even less popular than he is, with just 23% support. For now, the president seems content to remain the lesser of two perceived evils.